

DCFS Mart Team: Not Your Typical Social Workers

It's Tuesday, February 1st, 3 a.m. at the Los Angeles Coliseum Command Post. Normally a scene for late night concerts or sporting events, Supervising Children's Social Workers (SCSWs) Xiomara Flores-Holguin and Emilio Mendoza are on site with six DCFS Children's Social Workers (CSWs) gulping coffee, ready to roll-out on a Multi-Agency Response Team (MART) sweep. Tonight's target is the 38th Street Gang, a violent and well-organized South Los Angeles gang with ties to the Mexican Mafia.

Tonight, children's lives are at stake.

In one orchestrated sweep, law enforcement teams throughout the city enter some 60 gang-affiliated homes at the same time with military precision. DCFS MART social workers respond to ten of those homes, where children are sleeping with drugs and guns within their reach.

It's a huge task force, headed by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) with assistance from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), the Internal Revenue Service, Probation, District Attorney and City Attorney's office. The results: 58 people arrested on

indictments for racketeering, firearms, narcotics, extortion, murder and conspiracy charges; \$250,000 in cash recovered as well as 59 firearms, seven kilos of cocaine and methamphetamines for distribution and sale. Fourteen children, ranging in age from one to seventeen, are removed from danger and taken into protective custody.

It's definitely not the kind of work that you would expect of social workers. And a few years back, such coordinated responses were nonexistent. Within the County and at DCFS, it became increasingly apparent that gang activity and correlated drug activity were placing children in harm's way. This cutting-edge teaming of law enforcement and social workers helps mitigate the lethal threats to children posed by gang members and drug dealers.

SCSW Flores-Holguin recalls, "In the past, children were falling through the cracks, living in homes where gang and drug activity threatened their safety. DCFS, Parole and law enforcement would investigate these homes at different times, but nobody was sharing information. We were missing what now seems a lot of obvious signs, like the video camera on the porch, the graffiti and other signs of gang involvement, including the number 13, the gang symbol for the letter M—symbolizing the Mexican Mafia."



Supervisor Gloria Molina - a driving force behind the establishment of the DCFS MART Team



While it’s not illegal to be a gang member, it is illegal to be engaged in criminal gang activity and to expose your children to dangerous situations. “I remember a three year old posing for a photo flashing gang signs which he learned from his parents,” said Flores-Holguin. “The children are born into gang-affiliated families or are jumped (coerced) into joining the local neighborhood gangs to be groomed as the next generation of gang members.”

A need for greater coordination

Back in 2003, Supervisor Gloria Molina’s office was concerned that children were unnecessarily waiting for DCFS to respond during law enforcement investigations. Supervisor Molina’s office, DCFS, the Valinda Gang Task Force, the Sheriff’s Department, the Department of Probation and community partners strategized on how DCFS could be of service to children endangered in drug, gang and criminal situations.

Afterwards, Eric Marts, then Director of the Bureau of Child Protection, gave the go-ahead to create a team of special social workers that would accompany law enforcement on gang warrant operations. Today, DCFS Deputy Director Eric Marts, Manager Blanca Vega, Coordinator Emilio Mendoza, SCSW Karen Vance and SCSW Flores-Holguin direct the DCFS MART Team that numbers 16 staff and has participated in over 6,000 operations rescuing nearly 9,000 children since 2003. The MART Team responds to approximately 50 search warrants each month with its multi-agency partners.

Peter Amico, the former LAPD Captain over Operation Safe Streets and former LAPD Rampart Chief Charlie Beck were key players in getting MART off the ground. Soon after, the Long Beach Police Department, Probation, Parole, FBI, DEA, ATF, and Highway Patrol joined the team. Michael Moriarity, LAPD Commander with the Detective Bureau states, “The support of the DCFS MART Team was an integral part of our operations; their compassion for the children was and is amazing.”

All in a day’s – or night’s – work

Typically, the DCFS MART Team gets a call from the lead agency such as Probation or Parole indicating they plan to serve warrants. The team is often alerted days in advance so that social workers are ready to roll out at anytime and anywhere in the county. Once the DCFS MART Team has been alerted that a sweep is pending, the appropriate regional offices are contacted to prepare to meet the needs of the children and families involved. Following a multi-agency briefing and roll call, everybody rolls out together. Thousands of officers may be involved depending on who the target gang or group is.

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The officers must first secure the location while the DCFS social workers wait for their call out. Once the children are placed in a safe, designated area and the adults are handcuffed, law enforcement shows the social workers what weapons or drugs were confiscated. This evidence is crucial information for the Department’s argument in deciding whether DCFS will remain involved with this family.

Social workers are trained on the seven classifications of narcotics, indications of use, and how to communicate with users. “It’s important to identify if a parent is under the influence of drugs and assess their cognitive abilities — to see if they’re fidgeting or if they exhibit involuntary eye movement, an indicator of possible drug use.”

A banner day for the good guys

To take just one example of a MART success, in August 2010, the DCFS MART Team joined forces with Operation Disarm, including 40 federal and

regional law enforcement teams and nearly 1,000 officers. The largest parole sweep in the history of Los Angeles, it targeted 300 high profile parolees with felony convictions for weapons possessions and parolees with gang affiliations. This sweep resulted in 77 parolees arrested, 21 weapons with over 150 rounds of ammunition and drugs confiscated, and 11 children taken into protective custody and quite possibly saved from harm.

Not your typical social workers

These are not your typical social workers. Yvette Vega, a three-year veteran with the DCFS MART Team and self-confessed adrenaline junkie is a case in point. She finds the work exciting, stating, “We find drugs and money in the children’s backpacks, diapers, cribs and bassinets where the babies sleep.”

Vega described a recent narcotics raid: “A father is attempting to escape out the back door of his house while his three-year old is asleep in his room with loaded syringes and chunks of black tar heroin all over the floor within reach. All accounted, we find nearly 500 cocaine-filled balloons ready to sell.”



On another case, the police had intelligence that there were three loaded guns in an apartment — one used in a murder. A nine-year-old boy tells the Deputy, “I know what you’re looking for” and showed the Deputy where three guns were hidden in the broiler. Children are burdened with maintaining a secret that, when disclosed, may result in their parents being arrested and their being removed from the home.

CSW Vega recalled a case where 70-plus pounds of meth were found stashed in the drawers and closets of a little boy’s room. In the living room was an ice chest full of the extremely dangerous and highly addictive drug. The police found numerous assault weapons, one loaded, behind the baby boy’s bedroom door. “His nine-year old sister could easily have picked up an assault rifle while playing and accidentally killed her baby brother,” said Vega.

Problems can also arise when gang-affiliated families from one city move into another gang’s turf. After moving to the Valinda area of La Puente, the home of a family affiliated with the El Monte Flores gang was fired upon seven times in one month by the local Townsmen gang.

At a Team Decision Making meeting, the family was connected with various resources allowing them to move to another city, where the children were safer.

The best intervention is prevention

The DCFS MART Team has observed what most social workers know to be true — you can only work with those families willing to work with you. Many of our families have not had positive interactions with law enforcement. We can tell them what they need to do to keep their children safe and to help them understand how the gang lifestyle imperils their children. If you can reach the young ones to direct their energies somewhere else, then there’s hope for the future. We’re trying to save the next generation. The best

intervention is prevention with the younger ones not following in their parents’ footsteps.

“We’re getting the word out, and saving children’s lives in the process,” says MART CSW Yvette Vega. We are indebted to the MART social workers who have removed countless numbers of children from potentially life-threatening situations. Through coordinated teaming with our law enforcement, county agencies and community partners, they have made our communities, families and children safer.

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- Yvette Vega, MART CSW

